Alabaman in B.C. Legislature

By GWEN CASH

HEAR that REBEL YELL?

SHORTLY BEFORE the turn of the century a tow-headed baby girl with well marked eye brows and hazel eyes was born in Alabama, to be one of a family of two girls and seven boys.

Today, her brows thick and black, her hazel eyes shrewd and kindly behind glasses, her hair grown dark and plentifully besprinkled with grey, she's still surrounded by males. For she's Lois Mabel Haggen, one of two women in B.C.'s Provincial Legislature.

Only woman member of the Opposition, she succeeded her husband when he became ill as CCF representative for Grand Forks-Greenwood, the sparsely populated boundary constituency that sweeps from Osoyoos on the border over the mountains into rugged mining country and so to lovely Christina Lake.

Mrs. Haggen is outwardly a quiet woman, seldom provoked to fiery speech, who loves to garden and read poetry. But despite her serene manner she's well suited to follow in the footsteps of former CCF women members—dynamic, hard-hitting Dolly Steeves whose metallic voice often taunted the government, Dr. Laura Jamieson, fighting the battle of equal pay for equal work for women.

Lois Haggen is representative of a tough constituency settled by colorful pioneers in the early eighties to grow into a mining empire by 1900. Many of their descendants in Grand Forks and scattered over the magnificently scenic countryside are proud to cast their votes for Lois. The fact that when she gardens she does so without gloves, digging her hands deep into the soil she loves may have something to do with it.

SHE'S NO SISSY

Lois is no sissy. She'd lived in places with no electricity and cleaned the smoky chimneys of plenty of coal oil lamps. As a young girl she was stenographer in a penitentiary and learned potent facts about criminals at a very early age. Her husband Rupert, whose place she took in the legislature, surveyed the wide, open spaces of British Columbia and she with him. Later as a mining engineer he edited the Mining Board of B.C. from Vancouver but, no lover of city life, after some years he foresook it, which is how the Haggens fetched up at Grand Forks.

And how did it all happen? How did a little tow-head from Alabama end up as the member for B.C.'s boundary country?

IT'S QUITE A STORY—and somewhat symbolic of the development of B.C.

Lois' father, Frank Hill, was a timber cruiser. Just about the time Lois got to be school age he exchanged the forests of Alabama for those of Oregon and settled his family near the historic village of Le Grand.

Lois remembers how the kids would dance about her at play time in the school yard yelling "Talk, talk," then shriek with laughter at her southern accent, which today is all lost.

In 1911 Frank Hill looked at his seven sons and two daughters—a work force in themselves—and decided he should go farming. What about this Peace River country in northern British Columbia that was talked so much about? That sounded like a place of golden opportunity for a man with a large family.

So he went out and bought ploughs, harrows, all kinds of farm implements, a cow and chickens, and shipped them together with a wagon and a team of four horses via Sumas Prairie by rail to Ashcroft. That was the end of the line. From there on Frank Hill and four of his sons drove along the old Cariboo trail, stopping at frequent intervals, so one of Lois' brothers declares, to rescue escaping chickens from thieving coyotes.

The Hills only got as far as Quesnel. There the Fraser was frozen and remained frozen till long after Mrs. Hill and the rest of the family arrived. Then she decided Quesnel was north enough. Even there education was pretty primitive.

Lois went to school in a log building that had windows only on the north side so high up pupils could only see the sky, lest, I suppose, their attention be distracted from their studies. She did her sums on an 8x12-inch slate framed in wood with a slate pencil that squeaked like a mouse and she cleaned it for writing with a rag wet with spit.

"I can still smell those awful slate rags," said Mrs. Haggen. "Most were used and used till they dropped apart. But Mother, being a cleanly soul, made us change ours occasionally."

The Hills lived in tents on the banks of the Fraser that first summer in Quesnel and until late

LOIS HAGGEN . . . knows the grass roots.

in the fall. Then most of the family moved to the Occidental Hotel and Mr. Hill and his older sons went cattle ranching in the rich, natural meadows back of Marguerite Lake.

"I suppose Dad must have had some money," said Mrs. Haggen. "Even in those days you couldn't live in a hotel like the Occidental for nothing. It burned down in 1916 and the piano, on which I used to practice, with it. I watched it drop a flaming torch from the fifth floor."

Lois took piano from a German named John Zschedrich, afterwards with the Vancouver Symphony, as is one of his daughters today. "Mr. Zschedrich spoke no English and I no German but we got along famously. He was a splendid teacher," Mrs. Haggen told me.

IT WAS THE DAYS of the First World War. Lois played for what she called the "tobacco dances"—dances arranged to raise money for tobacco for the boys at the front. Once, with some of her friends, she went to Barkerville, 60 miles away by winding road to play for a tobacco dance.

"There was so little music in those parts then," she explained," anyone who could play was made much of." We went in a two-seater sleigh and first night out stayed at the old Cottonwood House. You never saw such a spread as was put on the long table for supper—sizzling steaks inches thick, pies of all kinds, cakes, pickles, fruit that had been packed in all you could eat for 50 cents."

"There were 100 adults at the old Kelly Hotel in Barkerville and masses of babies put to sleep in corners while the adults had fun," recalled Mrs. Haggen. "We raised $1,017 for tobacco, which I think was very good going."

Before Lois and her friends left for home they were invited to plunge their hands into a hat filled with gold nuggets and take souvenirs. "There was a jam jar filled with gold on the counter, too," she remembers. "It had been there for weeks, quite unguarded."

Lois Hill got well acquainted with gold when on leaving grade school she became acting accountant for the Royal Bank at Quesnel.

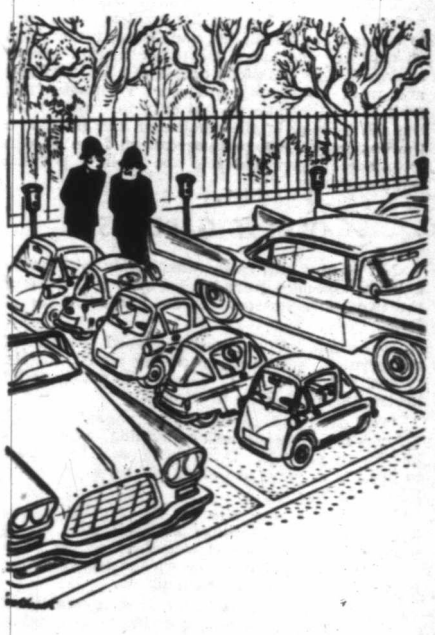
"I took the place of the man accountant who'd gone overseas, but of course, being only a girl, they called me acting accountant and I didn't get the same pay."

"The job was nothing but bookkeeping really. Except for the gold. All sorts of mines were operating in the district then. I learned to distinguish between the various deposits and knew by looking at and feeling the gold in the various buckskin pokes just where the gold came from."

SYMPATHETIC HEART

It was after she'd taken a stenographic course at Walla Walla, Wash., Lois Hill went to the penitentary nearby as court stenographer. But Rupert Haggen, to whom she became engaged, thought she was too young for such a sordid job. So back she came to British Columbia to marry and care for his motherless little daughter and eventually to have two of her own.

At her comfortable home in Grand Forks, Lois Haggen has no need to clean coal oil lamp chimneys but the memories of those days when she did makes for heartfelt sincerity when she talks of rural electrification in the house, which she does on all possible occasions. And with the stench of those spit-soaked slate rags still in her nostrils, she's accutely conscious of the needs of education.

"I never had a chance to go to high school, let alone college," she said.

But she knows her poets far better than a lot of college graduates, and the history of British Columbia. She's president of B.C. Historical Association for the second time in a row and she still gardens without gloves whenever her busy life allows her.